

October 2009

Overtaking

Overtaking is one of the highest risk manoeuvres for both drivers and riders because it can put the overtaking vehicle into the path of oncoming traffic, often at high speeds. If there is a head-on collision, the speed of both vehicles combines to create a much more severe impact.

In 2007, 175 people were killed in overtaking accidents, with a further 1,351 seriously injured. Not surprisingly, overtaking is a more dangerous manoeuvre for motorcyclists than for car occupants. Around 16% of motorcyclist fatalities occurred when the motorcyclist was overtaking compared with about 6% of car occupant fatalities.

| Severity of Injury | Casualties involved in overtaking manoeuvres | Total number of motorcyclist casualties | Percentage in overtaking manoeuvres |
|--------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Killed | 95 | 588 | 16% |
| Serious | 867 | 6,149 | 14% |
| Slight | 2,407 | 16,722 | 10% |
| All severities | 3,369 | 23,459 | 14% |

Table 1: Motorcyclist casualties in overtaking manoeuvres

| Severity of Injury | Casualties involved in overtaking manoeuvres | Total number of car occupant casualties | Percentage in overtaking manoeuvres |
|--------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Killed | 80 | 1,432 | 6% |
| Serious | 484 | 11,535 | 4% |
| Slight | 3,853 | 148,466 | 3% |
| All severities | 4,417 | 161,433 | 3% |

Table 2: Car occupant casualties in overtaking manoeuvres

There are three types of overtaking manoeuvre:

- overtaking a moving vehicle on the offside
- overtaking a stationary or parked vehicle, a rider or an object on the offside
- undertaking on the nearside.

Almost all of the car occupants (90%), and motorcyclists (86%) who died in overtaking manoeuvres were killed when a car or motorcyclist was overtaking a moving vehicle on the offside.

WHEN IT'S NOT SAFE TO OVERTAKE

Road markings and road signs provide important information about when it is unsafe and illegal to overtake.



Double White Line

Rule 165 of the Highway Code states that
You **MUST NOT** overtake:

- if you would have to cross or straddle double white lines with a solid line nearest to you (but see Rule 129)¹
- if you would have to enter an area designed to divide traffic, if it is surrounded by a solid white line
- the nearest vehicle to a pedestrian crossing, especially when it has stopped to let pedestrians cross
- if you would have to enter a lane reserved for buses, trams or cycles during its hours of operation
- after a 'No Overtaking' sign and until you pass a sign cancelling the restriction



No Overtaking Sign

Even if there are no specific road markings or signs that prohibit overtaking, there are many situations when it is not safe to overtake. For example, Highway Code Rule 166 advises that you **DO NOT** overtake if any doubt that you can do so safely or that you can see far enough ahead to be sure it is safe. Common situations where overtaking is unwise are:

- a corner or a bend
- a hump bridge
- the brow of a hill

¹ Rule 129 states that that you may cross the solid white line, "provided the road is clear, to pass a stationary vehicle, or overtake a pedal cyclist, horse or road maintenance vehicle, if they are travelling at 10 mph (16 km/h) or less".

Rule 167 of the Highway Code advises drivers and riders not to overtake when it might cause conflict with other road users, for example:

- approaching or at a road junction on either side of the road
- where the road narrows
- when approaching a school crossing patrol
- between the kerb and a bus or tram when it is at a stop
- where traffic is queuing at junctions or road works
- when you would force another road user to swerve or slow down
- at a level crossing
- when a road user is indicating right, even if you believe the signal should have been cancelled. Do not take a risk; wait for the signal to be cancelled
- stay behind if you are following a cyclist approaching a roundabout or junction, and you intend to turn left
- when a tram is standing at a kerbside tram stop and there is no clearly marked passing lane for other traffic

SAFE OVERTAKING

The basic, common sense message, is do not overtake unless you are sure you can complete the manoeuvre safely and without causing risk or inconvenience to another road user.

Allow plenty of time for your journey, so you do not feel pressured to exceed speed limits or make risky overtaking decisions. If you are planning a route which includes driving on single carriageway roads, then plan a bit of extra time into the journey in case you do get stuck behind something.

If you are behind a slower moving vehicle, the first thing to ask yourself before overtaking is: do you need to? There are several reasons why overtaking could be unnecessary. For example, if:

- The vehicle in front is travelling at or near the speed limit
- You will shortly be turning off the road you are on
- The vehicle in front might shortly turn off the road (look for clues, such as junctions ahead)
- A dual carriageway is not far away



Road Safety..... **Information**

Is it safe to overtake?

If you decide to overtake, the next question is, is it safe?

Can you see far enough ahead to make sure you have time to pull out, overtake and pull back in, safely? In addition to the Highway Code's list of situations where overtaking is not advised, there are several other factors to consider:

- Are there any junctions from which a vehicle might emerge while you're overtaking?
- What is in front of the vehicle, rider or object you're overtaking?
- Is there a gap you can safely pull back into after you have overtaken?
- Is the vehicle or rider likely to speed up while you are overtaking (for example, going downhill)? Can you complete the overtake without exceeding the speed limit?
- Is the vehicle or rider you're overtaking likely to turn right (are they indicating or positioned as if they might turn)?
- Is the vehicle or rider you're overtaking likely to pull out to overtake something in front of them (are they indicating or positioned as if they might do so)?
- What is happening behind you? Has anyone already started to overtake you?

Although you should complete an overtaking manoeuvre quickly, never exceed the speed limit for the road.

If the vehicle in front of you is overtaking then do not assume that it will be safe to follow. Make your own judgement of the situation.

Do not overtake if you are in any doubt about the situation or how safe it is.

Overtaking large vehicles

Larger vehicles can obscure the view to the front of your car more and so overtaking can be more difficult.

Drop back from the vehicle ahead, this will allow you to see ahead better and give the driver in front more chance to see you in their mirrors. Do not get too close behind a long or slow moving vehicle.

Make sure you know what is in front of the long vehicle you are overtaking, and that there is enough space to move into at the end of the overtaking manoeuvre. Remember that there might be a second slow or long vehicle in front of the one you are about to overtake.

Check that no one behind you has already started to overtake you and the large vehicle in front of you.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

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Road Safety..... Information

Overtaking Vulnerable Road Users

Pedal Cyclists and Motorcyclists

Give riders as much room as you would when overtaking a car. Remember that they may need to suddenly avoid a drain cover, pot hole, debris or a wet, oily or icy patch of road, which could cause them to wobble or swerve. It is also very unpleasant to be overtaken closely when you're on two wheels.

Horses

Be especially careful when overtaking horses. Give them plenty of room, do not rev your engine or sound your horn. Pass them slowly and with a wide berth. If there is not room to do so, be patient and wait until there is. Look out for any signals the horse rider may give you.

Overtaking at Night

Even greater care is needed when overtaking at night. Visibility is reduced, even in areas with street lighting, and it is harder to judge speed and distance.

Being Overtaken

As well as overtaking, we are also overtaken by others. When being overtaken, try not to speed up, move out or in any way make it more difficult for the driver or rider overtaking you to complete their manoeuvre safely. If necessary, slow down to let them pass and pull back in safely. Once you have been overtaken, make sure that there's a safe gap between you and the vehicle in front; if necessary, drop back to maintain the two second gap.

Further Information

- [The Highway Code](#)
- [Know Your Traffic Signs](#)